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Commentary: The reality is that transit justice is racial justice

By US Rep. Ayanna Pressley
July 8, 2020

Over the past several months, communities nationwide have seen many of the deeply entrenched inequities and injustices in our society laid bare. The dual public health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately impacted low-income families and communities of color in the Massachusetts 7th and nationwide, while the tragic and unjust murders of unarmed Black people at the hands of police officers have underscored the constant threat to Black lives in America, and spurred righteous rage across our country and around the globe.

As we work to stop this pandemic and fundamentally reimagine our criminal legal system, we must also demand changes that address the systemic inequities and injustices we encounter elsewhere in community—such as those in transportation and housing.

Everyone has a right to live and travel safely in community, but that right is denied to far too many in our communities. From subpar and overpriced housing in our neighborhoods to bus and train routes that force communities of color to spend hours more on transit every year, our basic infrastructure is exacerbating and reinforcing systemic racism in our community.

It's time to eliminate these injustices once and for all, and that's what I'm fighting to do.

In Boston, Black commuters spend an average of 64 more hours per year on the bus than white riders, and the data show that low-income families pay the most out of pocket for public transportation. To address these inequities and improve community mobility, I introduced the Freedom to Move Act with US Sen. Ed Markey, which would invest in public transit as a public good and ensure that everyone in community is able to get to school, work, and critical services without breaking the bank or spending hours on a bus or train.

Following calls from transit activists and leaders like Boston City Councilor At-Large Michelle Wu to “Free the T,” our bill would provide new federal funding to transit agencies like the MBTA in exchange for those agencies



US Rep. Pressley

agreeing to eliminate or reduce fares for riding and incentivize those agencies to make investments that center equity, like redesigning inefficient bus routes in low-income and underserved communities.

Key tenets of this legislation were included in the Moving Forward Act passed by the US House just last week, specifically a demonstration program that will support free and reduced priced transit fare programs. This landmark legislation would invest \$1.5 trillion in our infrastructure and transportation systems and I was proud to see several key provisions included to ensure our infrastructure investments finally center equity and justice for all communities.

The Moving Forward Act also includes the Housing as Infrastructure Act, legislation introduced by Chairwoman Maxine Waters (D-CA) and supported by several of my colleagues and me on the House Financial Services Committee. The bill would invest \$100 billion in our nation's affordable housing stock, including \$70 billion for the construction of new affordable housing. With housing costs skyrocketing and communities of color disproportionately impacted, it's time we invest in housing as a critical component of our nation's infrastructure.

This bill is a bold step toward rejecting the legacy of redlining—a racist practice used by banks to deny financial services to people of color – and finally affirming housing as the human right that it is and ensuring that everyone has a safe, affordable place to call home.

We cannot talk about public transportation in our communities without acknowledging the environmental racism and resulting health disparities caused by increased pollution in our neighborhoods. When cars and buses sit in traffic in our communities, the greenhouse gas emissions and exhaust they release directly harms us all. One way to reduce these emissions is to better support our bicycle commuters and encourage more folks to get out of their cars and onto their bikes, something I've championed as co-chair of the Congressional Bike Caucus. Cycling is cost effective, environmentally friendly, and will help keep our communities moving and healthy. This is why I advocated for provisions to be included in the Moving Forward Act to support more bike friendly infrastructure investments, expand bikeshare programs like BlueBikes here in the Massachusetts 7th and incentivize employers to establish bicycle commuting benefits.

Transit justice is racial justice, a reality we can no longer ignore. As we do the hard work of undoing generations of systemic racism, we must keep transportation and infrastructure front of mind so that we can finally affirm the right of all to live and move safely, accessibly, and affordably in community.

Ayanna Pressley represents the Massachusetts 7th district in Congress.

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